

# How San Remo Birthed the Jewish National Home

by Efraim Karsh

There is probably no more understated event in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict than the San Remo conference of April 1920. Convened for a mere week as part of the post-World War I peace conferences, which created a new international order on the basis of indigenous self-rule and national self-determination, participants appointed Britain as mandatory for Palestine with the specific task of



*The leaders of the U.K., France, Italy, and Japan in San Remo, April 1920. The importance of the San Remo resolution cannot be overstated as a turning point in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict. It signified an unqualified recognition of the Jews' right to national rebirth in their ancestral homeland.*

putting into effect the declaration originally made on November 2, 1917, by the British Government [i.e., the Balfour Declaration], and adopted by the other Allied Powers, in favour of the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.<sup>1</sup>

This mandate was then ratified on July 24, 1922, by the Council of the League of Nations—the postwar world organization and the United Nation's predecessor.

<sup>1</sup> British Secretary's Notes of a Meeting of the Supreme Council, held at the Villa Devachan, San Remo, on Saturday, Apr. 24, 1920, at 4 p.m., in E.L. Woodward and Rohan Butler, eds., *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939* (hereinafter *DBFP*), (London: HMSO, 1960), ser. 1, vol. 8, pp. 176-7.

The importance of this resolution cannot be overstated. Though falling short of the proposed Zionist formula that “Palestine should be reconstituted as the national home of the Jewish people,” it signified an unqualified recognition of the Jews as a national group—rather than a purely religious community—by the official representative of the will of the international community. It also acknowledged “the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine” as “the grounds for reconstituting their national home in the country.”<sup>2</sup>

### **From the Balfour Declaration to the Paris Peace Conference**

Though relegated since Roman times to a small minority in the Land of Israel (renamed Syria Palaestina by the Romans) under a long succession of imperial occupiers, the Jewish presence there was not only never eliminated, but the longing for the ancestral homeland has occupied a focal place in Jewish collective memory and religious ritual for millennia, with Jews returning to Palestine from the earliest days of dispersion, mostly on an individual basis but also on a wider communal scale.

In the 1880s, however, a different type of returnees began arriving: young nationalists who rejected diaspora life and sought to restore Jewish national existence in the historic homeland. In August 1897, the First Zionist Congress was held in the Swiss town of Basle, defining the goal of Zionism as “the creation of a home for the Jewish people in Palestine to

**Jewish presence in the Land of Israel was never eliminated. Jews returned to Palestine from the earliest days of dispersion.**

be secured by public law” and establishing institutions for its realization.

This goal was achieved on November 2, 1917, when the British government issued a formal statement in a letter from Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to Lord Rothschild pledging to “use its best endeavours to facilitate the ... establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people” provided that “nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”<sup>3</sup>

Reached after months of negotiations with the Zionist movement, several British cabinet deliberations, and consultation with U.S. president Woodrow Wilson and prominent Anglo-Jewish leaders, this recognition of the Jewish right to national rebirth by the then-foremost world power was not only endorsed by Britain’s war allies but also by prominent pan-Arab nationalists including Emir Faisal ibn Hussein of the Hashemite family, the celebrated hero of the “Great Arab Revolt” against the Ottoman Empire and the effective leader of the nascent pan-Arab movement. On January 3, 1919, he signed an agreement with Chaim Weizmann, upcoming leader of the Zionist movement, which endorsed the creation of a Jewish national home in Palestine in line with the Balfour Declaration and urged “all necessary measures ... to encourage and stimulate immigration of Jews into Palestine on a large scale.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Avalon Project, “[The Palestine Mandate](#),” July 24, 1922, Preamble.

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Laqueur, *The Israel-Arab Reader* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 36.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37-8.



*Edmund Allenby, commander of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, enters Jerusalem, December 11, 1917. Allenby was contemptuous of the meager French contribution to the fighting and encouraged Arab leaders to resist French attempts to enforce their authority.*

Armed with this agreement, on February 27, the Zionists asked the postwar peace conference, which had begun its deliberations in Paris the previous month, to recognize “the historic title of the Jewish people to Palestine and the right of the Jews to reconstitute in Palestine their National Home” and to appoint Britain as “Mandatory of the League [of Nations],” tasked with creating

such political, administrative and economic conditions as will secure the establishment there of the Jewish National Home and ultimately render possible the creation of an autonomous Commonwealth, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the

civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.<sup>5</sup>

The mandatory system to which the Zionists referred was enshrined in Article 22 of the League of Nations’ covenant, which sought to steer those “colonies and territories” of the defunct Ottoman and German empires that were “inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world” toward independence as “a sacred trust of civilization.” By way of doing so, each colony or territory was to be administered by a League mandatory that was to guide it toward self-governance in accordance with the distinct “stage of development of the people, the geographical situation of the territory, its economic condition and other similar circumstances.” More specifically, it stipulated that “Armenia, Syria, Mesopotamia, Palestine and Arabia must be completely severed from the Turkish Empire” and that certain communities in these territories

have reached a stage of development where their existence as independent nations can be provisionally recognized subject to the rendering of administrative advice and assistance by a

<sup>5</sup> [“Secretary’s Notes of a Conversation Held in M. Pichon’s Room at the Quai d’Orsay, Paris, on Thursday, 27th February, 1919, at 3 p.m.,”](#) *Foreign Relations of the United States: Paris Peace Conference 1919* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1942-47), vol. 4, doc. 9, pp. 161-4 (hereinafter *FRUS: Paris Peace Conference*).

mandatory power until such time as they are able to stand alone.<sup>6</sup>

**Britain and France found themselves at loggerheads over the region's future.**

The implementation of Article 22, however, was easier said than done as great-power historic rivalries and political differences, which had been suppressed by the necessities of winning the war, resurfaced at the peace conference. Britain and France sought the immediate designation of mandates—the former as a means to reduce the financial burden of keeping a million-strong army in the Middle East and to undo the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement by bringing Palestine and the oil-rich region of Mosul under its auspices; the latter in the hope of bringing “Greater Syria” under its wing. However, President Wilson, though architect of the mandate system (or indeed the League of Nations, which the United States eventually failed to join), insisted on sending an inter-allied commission to Syria to gauge opinion there. Though opposed to the idea, neither British prime minister David Lloyd George nor his French counterpart Georges Clemenceau felt able to dismiss the plan out of hand. Instead, they embarked on an intricate game of procrastination that drove the exasperated Wilson to send a purely U.S. commission to Syria, co-headed by Henry King, Oberlin College president, and Charles Crane, a Chicago valve manufacturer and influential

Democratic Party donor, whom Wilson deemed “particularly qualified to go to Syria because they knew nothing about it.”<sup>7</sup> By the time the U.S. commission telegraphed

the gist of its recommendations on July 10, 1919 (submitting the full report at the end of August),<sup>8</sup> the Treaty of Versailles between the Allies and Germany had been signed. In addition, Wilson had left for America without bothering to send the report to the deliberations on the Turkish peace treaty that continued apace, with the contents of the report made public only in 1922—long after the mandate issue had been decided.

It was thus left to Britain and France (with a little help from Italy) to complete the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of a new regional order on its ruins. This proved no easy task as the two war allies quickly found themselves at loggerheads over the region's future. Lt. Gen. Edmund Allenby, commander of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF), which had driven the Ottoman armies from the Levant, was openly contemptuous of the meager French contribution to the fighting. He encouraged local Arab leaders to resist the French attempts

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6. “[Secretary's Notes of a Conversation Held at Mr. Pichon's Room](#) at the Quai D'orsay, Paris, on Thursday, January 30, 1919, at 11 a.m.—Draft Resolutions in Reference to Mandatories,” *FRUS: Paris Peace Conference*, vol. 3, doc. 54, pp. 795-6; “[The Paris Covenant for a League of Nations](#). Text of the Plan adopted by the Peace Conference April 28, 1919,” *League to Enforce Peace*, New York, 1919, art. 22.

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7. “[Minutes of the Daily Meetings of the Commissioners Plenipotentiary, Thursday, March 27th, 1919](#),” *FRUS: Paris Peace Conference*, vol. 12, doc. 38, pp. 133-4.

8. “[Mr. C.R. Crane and Mr. H.C. King to the Commission to Negotiate Peace](#),” Beirut, July 10, 1919, *FRUS: Paris Peace Conference*, vol. 12, doc. 379, pp. 749-50; “[Report of the American Section of the International Commission on Mandates in Turkey, Submitted by the Commissioners: Charles R. King and Henry Churchill Crane](#),” Paris, Aug. 28, 1919, *FRUS: Paris Peace Conference*, vol. 12, doc. 380, pp. 751-848.

to enforce their authority in areas designated to them by the Sykes-Picot agreement. He also cultivated Faisal as the “supreme authority in Syria on all Arab matters whether administrative or military,” giving the emir free rein to intimidate political opponents and promising him a voice in the decision-making process over the Levant’s future. No less galling for the French was the British refusal to withdraw the EEF from the Levant before the peace conference had reached its decision. Requests to increase the number of French troops in Syria were peremptorily declined; Britain remained firmly in control, leaving the French with a gnawing sense of impotence.<sup>9</sup>



*Emir Faisal (center), the leader of the nascent pan-Arab movement, tried to insert his imperial dream in the postwar peace agreements at the Paris conference, February 1919, declaring that Syria was “sufficiently advanced politically to manage her own internal affairs.”*

### Faisal’s Imperial Dream

To complicate matters further, Anglo-French differences were skillfully exploited by Faisal to further his grandiose ambitions. Even during the anti-Ottoman revolt, the emir had begun toying with the idea of having his own “Greater Syrian” empire, going so far as to negotiate this option with key members of the Ottoman leadership behind the back of his British war allies.<sup>10</sup> When this ploy came to

naught, Faisal tried to insert his imperial dream in the postwar peace agreements telling the Council of Ten, the supreme decision-making body of the Paris peace conference (February 1919), that “Syria claimed her unity and her independence” and that it was “sufficiently advanced politically to manage her own internal affairs” if given adequate foreign and technical assistance.<sup>11</sup>

Making no mention of his agreement with Weizmann, the emir refrained from referring to, let alone endorsing, the Balfour Declaration, proposing instead to leave Palestine’s future “for the mutual

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Allenby to Faisal, Oct. 13, 1918, British Foreign Office (FO) 371/3384/175365; Faisal to Allenby, Nov. 2, 1918, and Allenby’s response, FO 371/3384/182643; Allenby to War Office, Oct. 19, 21, 22, 1918, FO 371/3384/175365, 175481, 177569; F. Georges-Picot’s telegram of Nov. 14, 1918, in Édouard Brémond, *Le Hedjaz dans la Guerre Mondiale* (Paris: Payot, 1931), p. 308.

<sup>10</sup> Efraim and Inari Karsh, *Empires of the Sand: The Struggle for Mastery in the Middle East, 1789-1923* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 194-7.

<sup>11</sup> “[Secretary’s Note of a Conversation Held in M. Pichon’s Room at the Quai d’Orsay, Paris](#), on Thursday, 6 February, 1919, at 3 p.m.,” *FRUS: Paris Peace Conference*, vol. 3, doc. 61, pp. 889-92; “Memorandum by the Emir Feisal, 1 January 1919,” in David Hunter Miller, *My Diary at the Conference of Paris, with Documents* (New York: Appeal Printing Co., 1928), vol. 4, pp. 297-9.

consideration of all parties interested.”<sup>12</sup> This phrasing not only gave the country’s non-Jewish population a veto power over the establishment of a Jewish national home

(in contrast to the Balfour Declaration that rendered them “civil and religious rights” but no say over Palestine’s future). It also made Sharif Hussein of Mecca, Faisal’s father and notional leader of the “Great Arab Revolt” who sought to establish a unified regional empire, and presumably Faisal himself (as would-be king of Syria) serious contenders to Palestine’s inclusion in their prospective kingdoms. As the emir put it on one occasion, since Syria was a “merchandise which has no owner,” it was only natural for Britain, France, and him to “try to appropriate it before the others.”<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, at a time when Faisal reassured his Jewish interlocutors that the “Arabs, especially the educated among us, look with the deepest sympathy on the Zionist movement ... We will do our best, in so far as we are concerned, to help them through: we will wish the Jews a most hearty welcome home,”<sup>14</sup> he was busy manipulating the King-Crane commission to subvert this goal and endorse his ambition for a Greater Syrian kingdom comprising Palestine. Within this framework, he assembled a highly unrepresentative “General Syrian Congress,” which would “make clear the wishes of the

**Faisal’s ambition was for a Greater Syrian kingdom comprising Palestine.**

Syrian people to the American Commission of Enquiry,”<sup>15</sup> and which was largely comprised of members of the small circle of (mostly Iraqi) nationalists who had

fought by his side during the war and manned his administration in its wake.<sup>16</sup> He also launched an extensive propaganda campaign, orchestrated mass demonstrations, and intimidated political opponents and ordinary citizens alike. “Feisal has taken the whole of the political campaign into his hands and has sent instructions to all parts of the country,” reported the EEF’s chief political officer Brig. Gen. Gilbert Clayton. “The people have been told to ask for complete independence for Syria, and, at the same time, to express a hope that it will be granted to other Arab countries.”<sup>17</sup>

Though keenly aware of Faisal’s machinations, as well as the congress’s unrepresentative nature and the flimsiness of much of the evidence submitted to the commission,<sup>18</sup> King and Crane chose to

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12 [“Secretary’s Note of a Conversation Held in M. Pichon’s Room at the Quai d’Orsay, Paris,”](#) on Thursday, 6 February, 1919,” *FRUS: Paris Peace Conference*, vol. 3, doc. 61, p. 891.

13 Zeine N. Zeine, *The Struggle for Arab Independence* (Beirut: Khayat’s, 1960), p. 50.

14 Laqueur, *The Israel-Arab Reader*, pp. 38-40.

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15 Abu Khaldun Sati al-Husri, *Yawm Maisalun: Safha min Tarikh al-Arab al-Hadith* (Beirut: Dar al-Ittihad, 1964), pp. 262-4.

16 Khairiyya Qasmiyya, *al-Hukuma al-Arabiya fi Dimashq bayna 1918-1920* (Cairo: Dar al-Maarif, 1971), p. 67, fn. 2; Eliezer Tauber, *The Formation of Modern Syria and Iraq* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), p. 15.

17 “Report by British Liaison Officer on Political Situation in Arabia,” Damascus, May 16, 1919, *DBFP*, vol. 4, p. 264.

18 [“Confidential Appendix to the Report upon Syria: For the Use of Americans Only,”](#) Aug. 28, 1919, *FRUS: Paris Peace Conference*, vol. 11, doc. 381, pp. 848-50; [“Report of the American Section of the International Commission on Mandates in Turkey,”](#) *FRUS: Paris Peace Conference*, vol. 11, doc. 380, pp. 764-5.

endorse Faisal's imperial dream over the objection of some of their advisors, recommending, "For the sake of the larger interests, both of Lebanon and of Syria ... the unity of Syria has to be urged" and that "Emir Feisal be made the head of the new united Syrian State."<sup>19</sup> However, at the time, according to a British estimate, only 15 percent of Lebanese favored Hashemite rule, and Lebanon's Christian religious leaders pleaded with the peace conference that the country "should not be placed in any way under an Arab and Moslem Government."<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, while feigning "a deep sense of sympathy for the Jewish cause," the commission dismissed the millenarian Jewish attachment to Palestine as valid justification for the establishment of a Jewish national home there. Effectively treating the Jews as a religious community rather than a nation, it recommended that "Jewish immigration should be definitely limited, and that the project for making Palestine distinctly a Jewish commonwealth should be given up," thus reducing the country's Jewish community to a permanent minority in Faisal's prospective Syrian kingdom. "There would then be no reason why Palestine could not be included in a united Syrian State, just as other portions of the country," the commission wrote,



*King-Crane Commission, Hotel Royal, Beirut, July 1919. Henry King (seated, left) and Charles Crane (right) endorsed Faisal's imperial dream, recommending, "Emir Feisal be made the head of the new united Syrian State" to include Lebanon and Palestine.*

the holy places being cared for by an International and Inter-Religious Commission, somewhat as at present, under the oversight and approval of the Mandatary and of the League of Nations. The Jews, of course, would have representation upon this Commission.<sup>21</sup>

Nor was Faisal deterred from accompanying his machinations with intimidation attempts whenever he deemed it necessary. When the peace conference reconvened in London on February 12-April 10, 1920—with the salient absence of the United States—to discuss the Turkish peace treaty, the delegates were warned by Allenby that

<sup>19</sup> *FRUS: Paris Peace Conference*, vol. 12, pp. 789-91.

<sup>20</sup> Reports by Clayton (Beirut), Oct. 15, 31, 1918, FO 371/3384/173729, 181781; Forbes-Adam (Paris), Sept. 26, 1919, *DBFP*, vol. 4, pp. 439-40.

<sup>21</sup> "[Report of the American Section of the International Commission on Mandates in Turkey](#)," doc. 380, pp. 794-5.

any decision incompatible with Arab aspirations concerning Syria, Palestine or Mesopotamia taken without Faisal's presence will not be acknowledged by Arabs and will cause great difficulties in the future for which [the Arab] nation declines all responsibility.<sup>22</sup>

**A pogrom erupted in Jerusalem demanding Palestine's incorporation into Faisal's newly proclaimed kingdom.**

When this threat failed to have the desired effect, on March 8, the emir had the General Syrian Congress proclaim him as King Faisal I of Syria "within its natural boundaries, including Palestine," in political and economic union with Iraq. France and Britain were asked to vacate the country's western (i.e., Lebanon) and southern (i.e., Palestine) parts.<sup>23</sup> And as if to underscore this requirement, between April 4 and 7, a pogrom erupted in Jerusalem demanding Palestine's incorporation into Faisal's newly proclaimed kingdom with five Jews murdered and another 211 wounded.

### **The London Conference**

Faisal's self-enthronement had no perceptible impact on the London conference, with Britain and France declaring this move null and void and proceeding to lay the groundwork for the long-awaited award of the mandates. However, this did not automatically translate to a Zionist gain as France's rejection of the emir's imperial ambitions neither implied a corresponding readiness to

reduce the territorial scope of its Syrian mandate nor acceptance of the British and Zionist interpretation of the Palestine mandate.

A heated debate revolved around Palestine's northern border, with Prime Minister Lloyd George backing the proposed Zionist line, which largely conformed to his own perception of Palestine as comprising the biblical territory "from Dan to Beersheba" with the northern border extending "up to the Litani on the coast, and across to Banias, the old Dan, or Huleh in the interior."<sup>24</sup> Likewise, Balfour maintained that Palestine "should obtain the command of the water-power which naturally belongs to it, whether by extending its borders to the north, or by treaty with the mandatory of Syria, to whom the southward flowing waters of H[er]mon could not in any event be of much value."<sup>25</sup>

Since this line signified the southern border of Syria, which was due to become a French mandate, and since it went way beyond Sykes-Picot's internationalization of Palestine's northern half, the Zionists had sought to win France's support for their proposed demarcation before the matter was decided by the peace conference. On September 11, 1919, Weizmann met the French chief advisor on Syrian affairs who intimated that "the French would accept the

<sup>22</sup> Meinertzhagen to Curzon, Feb. 19, 1920, *DBFP*, vol. 13, p. 218.

<sup>23</sup> For the text of the proclamation, see Husri, *Yawm Maisalun*, pp. 278-8; Allenby to Curzon, Mar. 13, 14, 1920, *DBFP*, vol. 13, pp. 224-5, 229-30.

<sup>24</sup> David Lloyd George, *The Truth about the Peace Treaties* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1938), vol. 2, p. 1144; "Memorandum by Mr. Balfour (Paris) respecting Syria, Palestine, and Mesopotamia," Aug. 11, 1919, *DBFP*, vol. 4, p. 347.

<sup>25</sup> Balfour to Curzon, July 2, 1919, *DBFP*, vol. 4, p. 302.

Litani river line without difficulty.”<sup>26</sup> He was left with a similarly upbeat impression after a meeting with Foreign Minister Stephen Pichon who indicated that while the French were not “deeply interested in the details of this or that line of the Palestinian-Syrian frontier, provided there is general satisfaction of France over the Syrian question,” they “would *like to show* that they are also doing something for Zionism.”<sup>27</sup>

By the time the peace conference reconvened in London, however, these positive sentiments had all but vanished. In late January 1920, Clemenceau had resigned the French premiership, and his successor Alexandre Millerand not only shared nothing of his predecessor’s affinity to Zionism and Jews but sought to resuscitate Sykes-Picot’s defunct internationalization scheme in an attempt to undermine the Jewish national home and the British mandate to facilitate its implementation. “I have satisfied myself from documentary evidence that French propaganda has greatly increased in Palestine during last two months and is now working actively against Zionism and for a French Palestine in a unified Syria,” the EEF’s chief political officer reported to British foreign secretary George Curzon on March 2, as the conference was deliberating the region’s future.

**French prime minister Alexandre Millerand had no affinity to Zionism and Jews.**

You will realize how easy it is in Palestine to conduct a very dangerous propaganda and how easy it will be to wreck at its outset our administration and policy of His Majesty’s Government. I am of the opinion that the French aim at nothing less.<sup>28</sup>

Matters came to a head when Lloyd George read a telegram from U.S. Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis, leader of the American Zionists and President Wilson’s confidant, warning that the application of the Sykes-Picot agreement to Palestine “would defeat full realization of [the] promise of [a] Jewish [National] Home” by dividing the country “in complete disregard [of its] historic boundaries,” and that the only way to implement the Balfour Declaration, which had been “subscribed to by France as well as other Allies and Associated Powers,” was to concede the proposed Zionist boundaries.<sup>29</sup>

This sent Philippe Berthelot, secretary-general of the French foreign ministry, who led most of the negotiations at the London Conference and who was “very scornful of the idea of a Jewish National Home” (to use Lloyd George’s words) into a tirade.<sup>30</sup> He disparaged Brandeis as having “an exaggerated sense of his own importance” (effectively contradicting his own earlier claim that “President Wilson

<sup>26</sup> Weizmann to Philip Kerr, Sept. 11, 1919, *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann* (New Brunswick and Jerusalem: Transaction Books and Israel Universities Press, 1977), ser. A, vol. 9, p. 213.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*; Weizmann to Balfour, Sept. 26, 1919, *ibid.*, p. 227 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>28</sup> Meinertzhagen to Curzon, Mar. 2, 1920, *DBFP*, vol. 13, p. 220.

<sup>29</sup> “British Secretary’s Notes of an Allied Conference held at 10, Downing Street, London, SW1, on Saturday, February 21, 1920, at 11a.m.,” *DBFP*, vol. 7, pp. 183-4.

<sup>30</sup> Lloyd George, *The Truth about the Peace Treaties*, vol. 2, p. 1162.

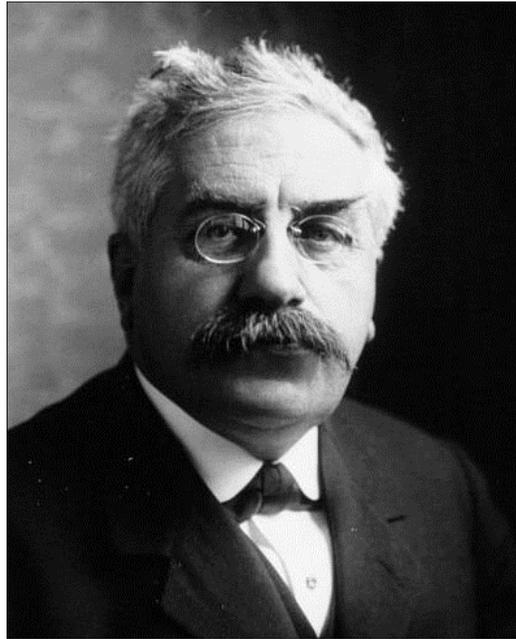
was entirely guided by Mr. Brandeis”). Further, he dismissed the Zionist proposal as “too extravagant to be considered for a single moment” before proceeding to lament Allied support for the “largely mystical” Zionist movement, which in his view was based on the misconceived hope of “rescuing large numbers of wretched Jews in Russia and Central Europe” at a time when “the great majority of these so-called Jews had [probably] very little real Jewish blood in their veins.”<sup>31</sup>

By now the two powers had agreed to the text of the Palestine clause in the Turkish peace treaty, which was broadly based on Lloyd George’s own definition: “Palestine: the boundaries to be defined in accordance with its ancient limits of Dan to Beersheba, and to be under British mandate.” The British prime minister was happy to leave the precise demarcation of the borders to a later stage and to inform Brandeis that his “geography was at fault, and that it might be as well if he studied more authoritative and accurate maps than were apparently at present at his disposal.” Even Berthelot calmed down, asking Lloyd George to inform Brandeis that France’s rejection of his “extravagant claims” notwithstanding, Paris “had no intention of adopting a hostile attitude, but was quite prepared to make liberal arrangement for the supply of water for the Zionist population.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> “British Secretary’s Notes of an Allied Conference held at 10, Downing Street, London, SW1, on Tuesday, February 17, 1920, at 3.30 p.m.,” *DBFP*, vol. 7, p. 107; “British Secretary’s Notes of an Allied Conference held at 10, Downing Street, London, SW1, on Saturday, February 21, 1920, at 11 a.m.,” *DBFP*, vol. 7, p. 184.

<sup>32</sup> “British Secretary’s Notes of an Allied Conference held at 10, Downing Street, London, SW1, on Saturday, February 21, 1920, at 11 a.m.,” *DBFP*, vol. 7, pp. 182, 185.



*The French delegation to San Remo, led by French prime minister Alexandre Millerand, questioned the British and Zionist interpretation of the Palestine mandate and indeed the notion of a Jewish national home.*

## San Remo

This feigned affinity proved very short lived. When the Supreme Allied Powers met again on April 19-26, 1920, in the Italian resort town of San Remo to finalize the Turkish peace treaty, the French were back to their old game. Prime Minister Millerand, enraged by what he considered less than unequivocal British rebuff of Faisal’s imperial ambitions, which he feared would reduce the French mandate in Syria to a mere façade for the emir’s effective rule, exploited the Palestine mandate as a springboard for improving France’s regional position. As a result, the French delegation to San Remo did not content itself with disputing Palestine’s northern border but questioned the British and Zionist interpretation of the Palestine

mandate—or indeed the notion of a Jewish national home—in an attempt to recover a measure of Sykes-Picot’s envisaged Anglo-French condominium.<sup>33</sup>

**According to the Italian prime minister, there was “agreement as to the desirability of instituting a national home for the Jews.”**

No sooner had Curzon requested that the Balfour Declaration, “which had been accepted by the Allied Powers,” be written into the Palestine mandate “in the precise form in which it had been originally given,” than Berthelot brushed aside the idea. Conceding that “the whole world was sympathetic to the aspiration of the Jews to establish a national home in Palestine” and expressing France’s willingness to do its utmost “to satisfy their legitimate desire,” he, nevertheless, proposed reconsidering this project altogether. Instead of writing the Balfour Declaration into the mandate, he argued, the Palestine question should be submitted to the League of Nations—not least since “he could not recall that general acceptance had [ever] been given to Mr. Balfour’s declaration by the Allied Powers.”<sup>34</sup>

The British foreign secretary was taken aback. “M. Berthelot was possibly not fully acquainted with the history of the question,” he corrected his French counterpart with quintessential English understatement. The terms of the declaration had been communicated in February 1918 to Foreign Minister Pichon and approved by him as they

had been by President Wilson and also by Italy, Greece, China, Serbia, and Siam. “He thought, therefore, he was quite justified in saying that Mr. Balfour’s declaration had been accepted by a

large number of the Allied Powers.” Berthelot would not budge. Since the declaration had neither been officially endorsed by the French government, nor accepted as a basis for Palestine’s future administration, he argued, France was categorically opposed to “any reference in an official instrument, such as the Turkish treaty, to an unofficial declaration made by one Power, which had never been formally accepted by the Allies generally.”<sup>35</sup>

The Italian prime minister Francesco Nitti interceded. “It was useless to go into past history,” he said. “It appeared to him that in principle the Powers were generally in agreement as to the desirability of instituting a national home for the Jews.” Yet the discussion had revealed Anglo-French differences regarding the rights of Palestine’s non-Jewish communities, and had, moreover, raised the entire issue of the status of Roman Catholics in the East. Hence, without questioning Britain’s ability to effectively carry out its mandatory obligations, it might have been advisable to set up an international commission that would propose new regulations for the Holy Places in lieu of the existing ones as well as methods for the adjudication of interfaith disputes.<sup>36</sup>

This enticed Millerand into action. Even at the London conference, the French had used the issue of Christianity’s holy sites as a vehicle for reintroducing the internalization of

<sup>33</sup> Lloyd George, *The Truth about the Peace Treaties*, vol. 2, p. 1155; Jan Karl Tanenbaum, “France and the Arab Middle East, 1914-1920,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 68 (1978): 7, p. 39.

<sup>34</sup> “British Secretary’s Notes of a Meeting of the Supreme Council, held at the Villa Devachan, San Remo, on Saturday, Apr. 24, 1920, at 4 p.m.,” *DBFP*, vol. 8, pp. 159-60.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 160, 168.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

Palestine envisaged by Sykes-Picot, only to run into unwavering British opposition.<sup>37</sup> Now that his Italian counterpart had reopened the issue, the French prime minister would not miss the opportunity to gain a say in administering Palestine at Britain's expense. The way he saw it, the Palestine question involved three real issues: "The first was that there should be a national home for the Jews. Upon that, they were all agreed. The second point was the safeguarding of the rights of non-Jewish communities. That again, he thought, offered no insuperable difficulties. The third was the question of existing traditional rights of non-Jewish bodies." And despite his absolute trust in Britain's ability to "display her well-known liberal spirit in dealing with this question," he would like the conference to factor into its decisions "the moral situation in France created by centuries of sacrifice" in the Holy Land.<sup>38</sup>

Lloyd George would have nothing of this. While it made sense for a European power to act as protector of the Roman Catholic community so long as Palestine was under Ottoman rule, he said, this was no longer the case. Britain was not Turkey as far as the treatment of religious and ethnic minorities was concerned, and it was inconceivable to subject it to the same conditions "which had been imposed upon the Turks by force after a

**The top French diplomat claimed that all the Jews in France were anti-Zionist and had no desire to go to Palestine.**

series of bloody wars." Making France the protector of Palestine's Catholics at a time when Britain was in charge of administering the country would not only be "insulting and humiliating to

Great Britain" but would "simply lead to a dual administration by two Great European Powers," which in Lloyd George's view "would make it quite impossible for Great Britain to administer the country, and it might even easily raise difficulties in regard to her relations with France."<sup>39</sup>

This view prevailed. The French backed down, only to resume the attack on the insertion of the Balfour Declaration to the terms of the mandate. Berthelot dismissed the declaration as "a dead letter" and claimed that "all the Jews in France were anti-Zionist, and had no desire at all to go to Palestine," whereas Millerand suggested repeating the declaration's substance while omitting the provision that the "mandatory will be responsible for putting into effect the declaration originally made on the 8th [2nd] November, 1917, by the British government and adopted by other Allied powers."<sup>40</sup>

Curzon seemed at a loss as to what exactly the French took exception. Were they opposed to creating a Jewish national home in the first place, or were they anxious to protect the rights and privileges of Palestine's non-Jewish communities? He had understood that France was agreeable to inserting the Balfour Declaration in the peace treaty, albeit not in its precise phrasing and without noting that it had been originally made by the British

<sup>37</sup> "British Secretary's Notes of an Allied Conference held at 10, Downing Street, London, SW1, on Tuesday, February 17, 1920, at 3.30 p.m.," *DBFP*, vol. 7, pp. 103-6, 108-12.

<sup>38</sup> "British Secretary's Notes of a Meeting of the Supreme Council, held at the Villa Devachan, San Remo, on Saturday, Apr. 24, 1920, at 4 p.m.," *DBFP*, vol. 8, pp. 163-5.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 164, 66.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 163, 167.

government at a certain date; and he had endeavored to meet these objections, however misconceived they might be. But now the French delegation seemed to have substituted its own draft for the insertion of the declaration in the peace treaty even in a modified form, which was something that Britain, as the designated mandatory for Palestine, could not possibly accept. Besides, argued Curzon, “the Jews regarded the declaration of Mr. Balfour in its entirety as the charter of their rights, and they attached great importance to reference being made to the original declaration in the Treaty of Peace.” And though the French might believe that the Jews “had no reason to attach capital importance” to the declaration’s inclusion in the treaty, the “fact remained, however, that they did attach such importance, and, after all, they were the best judges of their own interests.” In these circumstances, was it really necessary to continue squabbling over an issue on which the British government had taken up a position from which it was practically impossible for it to retreat?<sup>41</sup>

With Millerand acquiescing in this request on condition that the relinquishment of French religious privileges not be formally mentioned in the treaty and that France’s point on the political rights of Palestine’s non-Jewish population be recorded in a *procès-verbal*, the terms of the mandate were quickly agreed on, to be subsequently incorporated into the Turkish peace treaty, which was signed four months later in the French town of Sèvres.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 167-9.

<sup>42</sup> “[The Treaty of Peace between the Allied and Associated Powers and Turkey](#). Signed at Sèvres, August 10, 1920,” Macedonian Press Agency News and Document Archive, Athens, art. 95-7.

## Conclusion

“Among the more satisfactory items of news from San Remo is the statement that Great Britain is to receive a mandate for Palestine which will be considered, in term of Mr. Balfour’s Declaration, a national home for the Jews,” read a London *Times* editorial on April 27, 1920:

We recently called attention to attempts that were being made to invalidate that Declaration, which embodied wisely, albeit tardily, the only sound policy the Allies could adopt towards the Jewish people ... But though this opposition was at length overcome, and the promise given, the opponents of the promise have not wearied in their efforts to render it nugatory. They dislike the idea that the Jews should have a national home of their own and would fain persuade the non-Jewish world that the Jews are merely a religious denomination without special race character.

It is a historical tragedy that this criticism, which was primarily directed against “a section of the super-British Jews whose title to speak for the Jewish masses is as meager as their knowledge of them,” remains as valid today as it was one hundred years ago. Only now it is the Palestinian leaders (and their international champions) who remain entrenched in the rejection not only of the millenarian Jewish attachment to the Land of Israel but of the very existence of a Jewish people (and by implication its right to statehood). Rather than keep trying to turn the clock backward at the cost of prolonging their people’s statelessness and suffering, it is time for their leaders to shed their century-long recalcitrance and opt for peace and

reconciliation with their Israeli neighbors. And what can be a more auspicious timing for initiating this sea change than the one hundredth anniversary of the San Remo conference?

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